



# Essay

## Historical Essay: Ayako Ishigaki (1903-1996)

Journalist, biographer, activist for peace, social justice and women's rights (Ishigaki, back cover), Ayako Ishigaki was born in Tokyo, Japan in 1903. Her book, *Restless Wave: My Life in Two Worlds*, is a fictional autobiography of her life during the time in which she grew up, the early 1900's. It was one of the first novels written by a Japanese woman to be written in English. This time was a tumultuous time for Japanese people. In the late 1800's and early 1900's Japanese women went through several transformations and western U.S. culture began influencing Japanese society. The Japanese culture during the Meiji period (1868-1912) opened doors for the traditional domestic sphere of women, and women began to question their traditional roles and wanted more of an equal role in society with men. Ayako wrote this book under a pseudonym, Haru Matsui, to protect her identity with regards to any negativity towards her or her family because of her activism.

Japan was a patriarchal state. The government and centuries of Japanese tradition emphasized and supported the idea that the woman's place was in the home. Japanese culture trained girls to be subservient to men, domestic in their roles, and women were highly regarded for their domesticity. Sewing, cooking, being a good wife and mother were the most important goal for women. Girls were taught these skills from the beginning of their lives. One of the important lessons taught during the "coming of age" for a girl in Japanese culture was the tea ceremony. This lesson in itself was revered by young girls and is an example of the priorities for women at the time. Haru herself looked forward to her lessons which were a sign of her growing up: the tea ceremony, how to receive guests in the home, ethics, flower arranging, etc. In 1916, the world was at war and a cry for change and justice was just beginning in Japan. Haru and her family, however, did not comprehend these changes and their world at this time still revolved around the family and this domestic sphere for women (Ishigaki, 72-73). The culture was embedded in deep tradition that was highly regarded. To quote Haru's grandmother, "If we stray from the path of our ancestors we shall lose the peace within us..." (Ishigaki, 73)



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Keeping their ancestral history alive, however, became increasingly difficult. Western influences began to change Japanese society as changes were happening with regard to industrialization, economy, education and the Japanese political system. These changes shook the traditional values and social structure that had been in place for so long. The women's domestic sphere itself began to change. Women wanted more rights, more of a voice in both politics and family and they demanded more respect. Ishigaki tells a story in her book which shows one aspect of this change from the old customs to Westernization of the Japanese culture. While walking one day she was rebuked by police regarding her dress. They shouted "Hey there! That short-sleeved dress! Your arms are sticking out! . . . Make those sleeves longer so that you won't corrupt public morals!" In response, Haru thinks, "Recently I had begun wearing Western dress, and a few days before, I had cut off my long flowing hair. . . My aunt, when she saw me had been as startled as if I had lost an arm. "In that shape, who would want you for a bride?" she had asked me." (Ishigaki, 130-131). This is one example of an incident that directly affected Haru and was a part of her beginning to question her own culture and its validity and value. She began to question her role as a woman in her society and how she was judged based on clothing and social status within the role she was in. She was acting in direct contrast to the strict traditions in which she was raised.

After high school Haru convinced her father to allow her to go to another school rather than begin preparing for marriage. This school, Jiyu Gakuen, was founded by Motoko Hani. Motoko was a women's rights activist. Her speeches and teachings resonated with Haru, and Haru began to question more earnestly what the differences were in the traditional ideal for women and what her personal ideal would be as she searched out what freedom was within her society. Another major event for Haru was the Earthquake of 1923. When the earthquake hit, her school was a part of the earthquake relief effort. Haru was exposed to the poorer side of life. She became passionate about the "socially lost" people and began a path of searching for ways to help. She recognized the limits of her own education and began looking for a job and began her own quest for social causes.

As Japanese women began to migrate to the United States, around 1900, they were concentrated in California and on the Pacific coast in 1900. The United States passed an "aliens ineligible to citizenship" provision in 1924. This Immigration Act affected Japanese people that wanted to immigrate to the U.S. The act banned immigration of Japanese people and was not changed until the Immigration Act of 1965 opened the doors again. This resulted in causing "institutional and interpersonal racism" (Japan-101) within the U.S. not only by Americans but also by the different generations of Japanese people within the U.S. Ishigaki immigrated to the United States during this time.



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She moved to the United States in 1926 with her sister and her family. While there she fell in love with an artist (who was married) and even though her fiancé in Japan had gotten permission from her family to marry her, (which would have provided her security in Japan and would have been the traditional ideal for a woman), she lived with the artist until he obtained a divorce and married him.

The couple faced many challenges. One of them was the Great Depression in which Ishigaki took on a number of different labor jobs to help support them. This provided Ayako with a different vision of social justice than she had prior. Together the couple shared a vision of social consciousness. Her activism with social causes and a fear for her family back in Japan and any reprisals that may face them due to her actions made her write her book *Restless Wave* under a pseudonym, Haru Matsui. As an activist she took on several pseudonyms when writing articles which described the inhuman treatment of Japanese workers and the exploitation of women (Ishigaki, 258). Ayako was truly a pioneer for women's causes during her life and not only wrote about them but lived a life facing these challenges and trying to change old ideals within society and culture.

*Contributed by Karen Boone*

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